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Exploring the Role of Social Media on Conflict Intensification and Construction of Peace Narratives: A Sociological Inquiry

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Abstract

Online platforms in the contemporary era have been able to reshape the patterns of social life. Social media plays a significant role across every sphere of human endeavor. Social media is not just helping in the dissemination of the information, but it is emerging as an arena where different narratives are developed, transmitted and debated. Hence, human life today is becoming an integral part of digital networks where new opportunities flourish. There are prominent social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Whatsapp which have become core centers for the exchange of information and they have widened their influence across every stratum of society, thus amplifying divisions and unrest at the same time and performing as a tool for peacebuilding and dialogue. The study seeks to examine the dual role of social media in peacebuilding and conflict escalation through a comparative case study of the Delhi Riots 2020 and the Me Too movement of 2017. It aims to comprehend how digital technologies are socially constructed and how they shape societal attitudes and perceptions, create we-feeling among the community, and facilitate the development of collective conscience in settings where conflict and peacebuilding coexist. The study integrates key sociological theories that include symbolic Interactionism, conflict theory and framing theory to understand how digital technologies shape individual and collective identities in relation to social relationships during conflict and peace processes, to critically examine how digital platforms reinforce hierarchy of power relations, accelerate the diffusion of the content that intensifies group polarization and serve as a mechanism for group mobilization either for conflict or peace; and to study how narratives are socially constructed, exacerbated, or deconstructed, altering public perceptions and practices. This research integrates comparative case study methodology with qualitative content analysis to provide a nuanced understanding of the topic where the data are drawn from the digital platforms, including social media posts and news media. The Delhi Riots 2020 case provides evidence of how social media played a major role in the immediate spread of fabricated information, opposing framing, hate speech, communal tensions, escalating offline violence. In contrast, Me Too 2017 movement challenged power structures, accentuates the potential of online networks to build global solidarity, empowered underrepresented groups to be heard, sparked urgent discussion about consent and accountability and voiced against gender discrimination to engage in efforts towards systemic transformation. Examples cited are developed from both global and regional contexts to elucidate varied mechanisms in which media operate amid contested socio political spaces. The findings offer significant contributions reflecting the urgent call for comprehensive media literacy, mechanisms for regulating content and inclusive engagement strategies to utilize the positive potential of media. On the basis of analysis, the research concludes that the role of social media in intensifying conflict and constructing peace narratives is not set in advance, but it is shaped by social and political contexts, the goal-oriented behavior of social media users, and socio-technical design of social media platforms.

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Keywords: *Social media, social media platforms, conflict intensification, peace narratives, media Representation, Delhi Riots 2020, communal tensions, Me Too movement*

Introduction

Digital platforms in the present era have reshaped the contours of social life and have been playing a pivotal role in every domain of human endeavor. Human life today is increasingly embedded in digital networks where new opportunities flourish, and media is not just contributing to the dissemination of information globally, but it is also emerging as an arena where narratives are generated, propagated and contested. Media is a central arena for public discourse, political mobilization and identity construction and is responsible for intensifying conflict and peace narratives like violence and hate speech, solidarity, and it gives a stage for storytelling, speaking against various kinds of oppression. Schmidt and Simha (2025) mention that social media acts as a space for storytelling and actively involves stakeholders in cocreation related to messages of peace.

Social media platforms help to communicate swiftly, bypassing traditional media. It has become an irreplaceable part of the society, which is different from the various kinds of traditional media. In today's world social media stands as a powerful force; just staying active in social media can empower individuals in extraordinary ways regardless of platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter (Jansen et., al 2009).Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, have become very influential platforms promoting the construction of these narratives and are widely used for disseminating information and constructing narratives. (Jansen et., 2019) discussed the power of Twitter because, according to them it's the new word of mouth for the internet age. This transformation has given rise to the paradox while social media can empower marginalized voices and foster solidarity it can sometimes spread false information, polarization and intensify conflict.

Online social networks are expanding at a rapid pace and now serve as a major hub for all kinds of global and local news for million people. Social media allows easy communication and provides instant news and information but there is one major challenging issue that is spread of fake news (Aimeur et. al., 2013).Events that occurred solely within local contexts are now echoed widely across social channels using Hastags, Viral Videos, reels.

Schmidt and Simha (2025) mention that throughout human history there has been a continuous presence of war and conflict yet, there are those dedicated to fostering peace and preventing conflict. The Delhi Riots took place in crowded urban neighborhoods of Delhi were marred by violent unrest between the two religious communities which was framed along the religious lines substantial loss of life and property occurred. Social media platforms were inundated with posts, images and testimonies with many voices urging for peace other escalating conflict and fragmentation. Me Too movement that began in 2017 and years of activism against gender based violence harnessed the power of social media to spur collective action for global solidarity. Storytelling of the victims who underwent gender based violence at workplace to other spaces had swiftly occupied social media through hash tags and posts that led to an arrest of the perpetrators across the globe showing the power of social media as a medium for solidarity, peace, justice and collective conscience globally. Delhi Riots and Me Too movements are two important movements of contemporary socio-political unrest. These two movements demonstrate its two sided nature and although it took place in different socio-political context media served as a mediator in both the cases.

Statement of the problem

The widespread emergence of social media platforms has profoundly transformed the manner in which societies face and navigate conflict. Struggles for power, identity, justice was once contained within physical

boundaries such as streets, public spheres, institutional area which now takes place at the same time across digital platforms. These online arenas allow for rapid mobilization, decentralized organization and amplify marginalized voices. While this feature of social media that includes speed, reach and accessibility enables empowerment it also simultaneously positions it as a potent source for spreading misinformation, fake news, misleading information, escalating hostilities and reinforcing animosity.

In case of Delhi Riots 2020 and Me Too Movement 2017 highlighted the paradox. In case of Delhi Riots social media channels were used to propagate provocative rhetoric, distributed manipulated videos and mobilized people along communal sentiments, even as other users of media tried to appeal for peace and mitigate violence. In contrast Me Too movement utilized digital platforms to document instances of gender oppression, coordinate large- scale peace protest, promoted international solidarity against gender based violence- However the movement encountered substantial obstacles due to the spread of misinformation, fake news, focused campaigns on false information and giving rise to challenging movements with polarizing effects. Even with the substantial research emerging in the topic of social media and political mobilization there remains a lack of comparative sociological analysis on how the digital platforms with the same affordances can serve both as a catalyst for conflict escalation and instrument of peace building globally.

By integrating a comparative case study design with qualitative content analysis the study addresses an important gap in the sociological research of the capabilities offered by digital platforms which can either fuel divisions or fosters collective cohesiveness, this kind of enquiry is important for the scholar, policymakers striving to make use of social medias potential for reconciliation while mitigating the role in conflict intensification.

Significance of the study

In the Contemporary era social media has entered every aspect of human life be it political or social hence it is very prudent and urgent to understand the role of social media in shaping narratives of peace and conflict. While social media has been very beneficial medium for the dissipations of information bringing awareness, unity, fostering global solidarity it has also been criticized for escalating tensions, violence, and misinformation. This paradoxical nature of the social media platforms poses complex challenges for the policymakers, and scholars alike.

By incorporating theories like Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism and Framing Theory the research offers multidimensional sociological framework for understanding how digital technologies construct, reinforce and contest narratives during social upheavals. This theoretical synthesis moves beyond single-lens analyses providing a richer understanding of the online social process.

By doing a comparative case study of Delhi Riots 2020 and Me Too Movement 2017 through qualitative content analysis on the basis of various social media platforms, the paper addresses a gap in existing literature by exploring cross-cultural and cross-contextual variations of how social media is used both in construction of peace and conflict narratives.

Findings from this paper can benefit policymakers, presses importance for promoting digital literacy including regulating digital platform regulation, community level interventions that aims to underline the harmful effects of Social media on online hate speech and misinformation and in doing so it becomes easy for the users of social media to effectively harness social media for conflict prevention.

The two case studies are rooted in a different socio-political and cultural context and they illuminate viral spread of narratives, the role of social media platforms using hashtags in shaping collective action and identity and the interplay between online and offline mobilization are globally relevant. It can be applied to other conflict-prone societies navigating the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

By understanding the dual role of social media in building conflict and peace narratives this paper contributes to the growing body of sociological research that seeks to understand the digital public sphere which helps to shape and promote social cohesion and mutual understanding. The study contributes to the

further scope of research by bridging online mediated conflict environments with adolescents and youth vulnerability.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does social media help in the construction of peace narratives and conflict intensification in case of Delhi Riots and Me Too movement?
2. What are the similarities and differences that evolve in framing, circulation and reception of conflict and peace narratives when applied to these socio social political contexts?
3. How do the technological features like, live streams, videos, reels, podcast, hashtags, and memes help shape collective identities and public conception during these movements?
4. How can conflict theory, symbolic interactionism and Framing theory be applied to explain the dual role of social media in peace building and conflict intensification?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of social media platforms in constructing peace narratives and conflict intensification during Delhi Riots and Me Too movement.
2. To compare the similarities and differences in framing circulating and reception of conflict and peace narratives across the two movements.
3. To analyze how the digital affordances such as hashtags, memes, videos and live streams shape collective identities, public perceptions and mobilization process.
4. To apply conflict, symbolic interactionism and framing theory in explaining the dual role of social media as a site for both conflict escalation and peacebuilding.

Literature Review

Social media- mediated production and circulation of narratives

Over the last several decades we have seen how social media has emerged as the dominant source of news consumption and information due to its ability to deliver news in real time it has reshaped the communication experience and how audiences process and engage with information (Rehman & Riaz, 2021; Newman et al., 2023*)*. Social media platforms operate mainly through the internet based application which is rooted in both technological and ideological foundations of web 2.0 (Karimov & Brengman, 2011). Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, has become very influential platforms promoting construction of these narratives and is widely used for dissipating information and construction of narratives (Jansen et al., 2009). It was Marozzo and Bessi (2017) who discussed the power of Twitter because according to them it's the new word of mouth for the internet age. Among all the social media platforms Twitter content or (Tweets) became increasingly split along emotional and ideological lines. Hence, according to Lai and To (2015) social media has become an effective tool for advocacy, emergency communication, and fostering citizen participation they were of the opinion that the advent of the Smartphone era has incorporated the unparalleled expansion of social media platforms, mobile applications, blogs and real-time messaging allows mobile phone users browse and stream content at high speed and gives individual great control to communicate, coordinate and steer through effectively transcending the constrains of time and space.As online social networks are rapidly growing there is unlimited and easy communication and as there is instant news and information dissipations there lies a challenge of fake news circulation. As social media is unrestricted without ethics it can make users circulate misleading information via internet (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Schmidt & Simha, 2025).

Social media platforms as a site of Conflict Escalation and Peace Narratives

Social media platforms have unlocked new potentials and challenges for enabling socio- political transformation and has shown itself to be a key platform of communication amid both local and international crisis from act of violence to natural catastrophes. The rapid expansion of social media usage amidst growing conflict and its growing influence into technologically- intensive conflict deserves thoughtful consideration (Castells, 2012; Rehman & Riaz, 2021).Social media serves as a powerful tool in shaping current and polarizing conflict and encourages actions aimed to empowering individuals and communities to coordinate collective efforts for collective action to assist their actors within the cyber domains, across land, air and sea (Castells, 2012; Jackson et al., 2020). Collective action, protest and social movements and intractable conflicts is central to social media. Citizens are collaborating in participation through social media. Social media acts as a powerful strategic resource in recent conflict including the Isreal- Palestine Conflict the so called Arab Spring the ongoing war in Syria (Rehman & Riaz, 2021).

Ekoh and George (2021) highlight that digital technologies facilitate real-time information sharing, often supported by video evidence. Denskus (2019) mentions that social media contributes to peacebuilding through early warning, collaboration, policy influence, and fostering dialogue. As argued by Fisher et al. (2000) peacebuilding aims to confront the deep-rooted structural and behavioral foundation of violence, such as inequality, discrimination, and suspicion, rather than only focusing on conflict behavior. In this sense, peace building encourages mutual trust, reconciliation, and communication among diverse groups to prevent future conflict. Omotayo & Nelson (2022) mentions that digital technology facilitates instant access to information and social media has significantly reshaped patterns of global interactions, influencing peaceful mobilization, conflict intensification and reconciliation processes in post conflict settings. In the contemporary interconnected world, peace is very necessary for socio- economic development, as conflict disturbs societal progress, thereby necessitating preventive measures by international, national and regional actors. The development in information and communication technologies have most notably reshaped conflict dynamics and resolution mechanisms. Through social media platforms information spreads quickly, social media strengthens social connections and promotes collective awareness, however its role in conflict and post-conflict context remains insufficiently recognized.

Few cases of how social media platforms promote Conflict and Peace Narratives

Nigussie et al. (2024) highlighted in their study that hate speech in Ethiopian broadcast media from 2020 to 2022, focusing on its role in framing the people of Tigray as "enemies of Ethiopia." The era witnessed heightened media polarization and the widespread circulation of hostile rhetoric. Notable personalities which included Prime Minister Abiya Ahmed, government officials, religious leaders and other elites used media broadcasting platforms that facilitated the spread of hate speech and contributed to the legitimization of state-sponsored violence. Also the religious leaders from various denominations further intensified hostility through the propagation of hostile rhetoric at religious events and open support for the Ethiopian National Defense Forces. Hence, the results reveal the crucial role played by the political and religious elites along with broadcast media, in normalizing hate speech and fueling violence, demonstrating the intersection of media and political authority in escalating ethnically driven conflict in Ethiopia.

Roy and Shukla (2016) noted in their paper, the nature of violence in India, by examining the ways in which media and digital platforms misuse exacerbates religious and community based conflicts. In their study they emphasized the role of social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, and SMS in spreading rumors, hate speech, and misinformation commonly fueled by political actors and conventional media platforms. The study investigates the relationship between inter-community and inter-religious violence, highlighting the use of religious interpretations in rationalizing aggression and conflict. By using the 2012 Assam riots as a case study, their study points to the critical need for accountable media practices during communal tensions.

Bondarenko et al. (2021) notes that the killing of George Floyd sparked global discussions on social media, particularly highlighting issues of racism and law enforcement in the United States. Platforms such as Twitter provided a vital space for Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists to assert their identity, challenge dominant narratives, and influence public opinion. Drawing on Habermas' theory of the public sphere, the study conceptualizes BLM's digital activism as a means of reshaping national discourse. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, it examines BLM tweets from May 25–31, 2020, revealing how activists employed language to expose systemic inequality, injustice, and racism, while using Twitter as an alternative platform for marginalized voices.

Together these studies reveal the dual dimension of social media serving both to escalate conflict and to facilitate democratic expression and activism, revealing the multilayered interplay between media technologies, institutional power and social transformation.

The Delhi Riots and the Me Too Movement and the role of Social media in Peacebuilding and Conflict Intensification

Rice and Moffett (2021) The MeToo movement gained momentum after Alyssa Milano's viral tweet encouraging survivors of sexual harassment and assault to reply "Me Too." Generation Z, with its heavy use of social media, heightened vulnerability to harassment, and strong commitment to gender equality, emerged as a key supporter of the movement. Although primarily online, MeToo displays the core features of a social movement, expanding political participation and influencing social and political discourse. Online expression increases exposure to mobilization efforts, fosters a sense of efficacy, and protest participation strengthens connections among activists, potentially promoting civic engagement an analyses revealed that simply supporting MeToo did not affect civic engagement, consistent with the free-rider problem. However, posting about #MeToo in both years and joining protests in 2020 were linked to higher civic engagement. These results challenge the common critique of youth "slacktivism."

Oleszczuk (2020) notes that the post-#MeToo era has reshaped how society understands sexual violence and gender oppression, with popular culture and media playing a central role in this shift. Through works like Lorena, Roll Red Roll, and We Believe: The Best Men Can Be, media challenges patriarchal norms, critiques rape culture, and promotes the de-normalization of toxic masculinity and gendered oppression. The paper explores how the #MeToo movement, since its revival in 2017, has influenced popular culture's engagement with issues of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Using feminist theory, it analyzes three cultural texts—Lorena (2019), Roll Red Roll (2019), and Gillette's We Believe (2019)—to show how media reflects and challenges gendered oppression and sexual violence.

Inukonda (2023) mentions in his paper the effects of communal riots on India's Muslim minority within the framework of identity politics. While Hindus and Muslims historically lived peacefully, recent decades have seen political manipulation of religious differences for power gains. The study focuses primarily on the 2002 Gujarat riots, which caused significant Muslim casualties. It also touches on the 2020 Delhi riots as a continuation of communal violence. Drawing on interviews and primary sources, the research shows how identity politics disadvantages Muslims and argues for the urgent need for policies at both national and international level that promote social harmony and cohesion in India. Siregar (2021) mentions that Umar Khalid was arrested by Delhi Police on 13th September for his alleged role in inciting the Delhi Riots that led to the death of 53 people majority from the Muslim community based on his speech that he made on 8th January.

Saxena (2021) notes that ocial media serve as a collective platform where people can voice concerns about social injustice, critique policies, and mobilize against crime. They have played a crucial role in advancing global protests against gender inequality. This study examines the impact of the "#MeToo movement" on shaping intentions to combat sexual harassment against women and proposes a communication framework to raise awareness and prevention. Using Partial Least Squares Path Modeling (PLS-SEM), data were collected from 800 Indian participants via WhatsApp and email surveys. Findings indicate that social

media movements such as #MeToo positively influence intentions to control sexual harassment, demonstrating that participation in such digital activism enhances awareness of sex-based crimes and fosters collective action.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves as the conceptual lens guiding the interpretation and findings. The study is grounded in the following theoretical perspectives that include Conflict Theory, Symbolic Interactionism and Framing Theory to analyze how social media operates in shaping peace narratives and conflict intensification. Taken collectively, these perspectives yield holistic insights of how social media platforms operate as arenas where meaning, power and resistance are negotiated.These frameworks help analyze how power, meaning and narratives are constructed, contested and circulated through digital communication.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory emerging from the ideas of Karl Marx and further developed by the later thinkers like C.Wright Mills, highlights the ways in which disparities in power and resources influence social relations and institutional arrangements. The conflict theory stresses on the struggle between the two classes Bourgeoisie and Proletariat one being the Dominant class and the other one is the Subordinate or the working class where powerful seeks to maintain its control and the marginalized groups resist and challenge their domination (Marx, 1867/1976; Mills, 1956). Through the conflict theoretical perspectives social media can be seen as a site of broader power conflicts, resources and ideology.

In the context of this study, conflict theory is particularly useful for understanding Delhi Riots 2020 and Me Too movement. In case of Delhi Riots social media played a very prominent for amplifying communal violence, division of people based on religion that itself reinforced narratives that served the interest of the dominant classes' political interests. Suppressing the minority Muslim voices, circulating misinformation, post inciting violence shows how online platforms became an important tools for the reproduction of inequality and hegemony. In case of MeToo Movement conflict theory reveals how the institutions like political and government tried silencing the victims which reflects the control of power by the dominant institutions. The survivors or the marginalized voices also challenged the age old patriarchal notions. By speaking against gender based violence women from all the sectors raised their voices over social media that disrupted traditional hierarchy of power in workplace, media and politics and mobilized online solidarity. Thus conflict theory helps us to understand how digital platforms reflect and reproduce struggles for dominance, but also opens an arena for contestations.

Symbolic Interactionism

It was George Herbert Mead who laid the foundation of Symbolic Interactionism, which was subsequently advanced by Herbert Blumer. The central role of symbolic Interactionism lies in understanding how meanings are created, negotiated and transformed within social interactions. It stresses on the role of symbols, language and shared experiences in shaping collective realities (Blumer, 1969). From this stand point , social media platforms function not merely as a technological platforms but a space where meanings are actively created and negotiated.

In case of Delhi Riots 2020 symbolic interactionism highlights how images, hashtags, videos that went viral, hate speech contributed to shaping strong narratives of identity and exclusion. In this context misinformation and misleading videos extended beyond simple factual errors; it operated as a symbolic practice that reinforced divisions between religious groups, intensifying violence, hatred and hostilities. In Case of MeToo Movement symbolic interactionism reveals how hashtags like #MeToo #MeTooIndia became powerful symbols of solidarity. The victims of gender based violence who shared their experiences from all the sectors of the society contributed to the collective narratives of resistance, transforming the individual

experiences of harassment into a globally recognized issue.Thus symbolic interactionism explains how shared meanings, experiences on social media shape the perception of legitimacy, justice, and collective identity.

Framing Theory

It was Goffman (1974) who talked about "Frame Analysis", he proposed framing theory which was later incorporated within media studies. Framing theory stresses on how events and issues are framed or presented in such a way that people interpret and respond to it. Frames focuses on certain aspects of reality while excluding other aspects which guides public perception and motivates them to take actions

In case of Delhi Riots 2020 it was evident that Muslims who are the minorities in India were framed to be the aggressors of communal violence even when they were the major victims of violence. The News media, posts and videos in the online platforms framed certain activist as anti-Nationalist or having some linkage with the terror groups who attempted to raise their voices against the government's CAA 2019 that led to the arrest of many activist in 2020. There were misinformation and selective issues of imagery frames were created that resulted in the mob violence and silenced minorities' perspectives. In case of MeToo Movement we can see how the survivors of the gender based violence strategically framed their personal accounts not as isolated incidents but as manifestations of systemic gender inequality. This reframing fostered empathy, built solidarity, gave women a space where they can talk about the oppression without fearing of the consequences, it also demanded institutional change, bringing the issue into mainstream debate. The framing theory in these cases highlights the power of competing narratives and selective representation in shaping public discourse and influencing policy outcomes.

When viewed together, these three perspectives taken into consideration provide a holistic lens for understanding the dual role of social media. Conflict theory highlights structural inequalities and ongoing power struggles, symbolic interactionism draws our attention to how the symbols, misinformation in the posts and videos and the shared experiences of the victim drew our attention to how meanings are constructed and negotiated in online spaces, and framing theory explains how narratives are framed which can shape collective action and interpretation.

Applied to the Delhi Riots these frameworks revealed how social media intensifies tensions by spreading hate, misinformation, and suppression of minorities by the power in contrast the MeToo movement illustrates how digital spaces can elevate marginalized voices, foster solidarity and demands social change.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a comparative case study design to understand how social media functions in the construction of peace narratives and conflict intensification. Two case studies are selected Delhi Riots 2020 and Me Too movement 2017 to show the relevance of the social media which has global relevance and heavy reliance on social media platforms like Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Whatsapp for mobilizing and discourse. By comparing these two movements with a different socio-political and cultural context it shows the centrality of social media. The studies therefore generate broader sociological insights into digital activism.

Methodological Approach

This study adopts qualitative content analysis approach. The method is very suitable because it goes beyond quantifying online activity to interpret symbolic meaning embedded in hashtags, memes, post, and digital campaigns. Through thematic coding, the study identifies how narratives of conflict and peace were framed, circulated and contested in online space during these two events.

Population and Sampling

The population of the research includes publicly available social media contents produce during Delhi riots 2020 and the MeToo movement. Given the vast amount of digital data purposive sampling was employed. Post were selected on the basis of criteria's that included event specific hashtags, high virility and visibility, relevance to either conflict escalation or peace building narratives. From these criteria, approximately 200 posts from each case study were sampled across Twitter(X), Facebook, Instagram and Youtube and Whatsapp.

Sources of Data

The data will be collected from both primary and secondary sources. For the primary data collection will be done from the social media platforms posts like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Youtube and Instagram. A user interaction that includes likes, tweets, reposts, comments. For the secondary data statistical analysis reports, government reports and academic literature were focused.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data consisted of text, images and videos. A coding framework was developed from both prior literature deduction and inductive reading of the posts.

Two broad categories were established: Conflict intensification- misinformation, hate speech, polarization, incitement of violence. Peace building- Solidarity, campaigns, calls for justice, and speak against gender based oppression.

To organize the data manually excel sheet was used. The paper incorporated descriptive analysis to map the hashtags, keywords and imagery. It used thematic analysis to group the content into conflict and peace narratives and lastly comparative analysis was adopted to examine similarities and differences across the Delhi Riots and Me Too movement.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines for digital research were carefully followed. Only publicly available content was analyzed ensuring no breach in privacy. User identities were anonym zed in reporting and harmful or inciteful materials was paraphrased rather than reproduced.

Limitations

The study is limited as reliance on purposive sampling restricts the generalizability of findings but allows deep sociological insight. Social media data is fluid and continuously changing meaning the analysis captures only a specific time period of the two movements that includes the Delhi Riots and Me Too movement.

Case Studies Findings and Interpretation

Case Study 1: Delhi Riots 2020

The Delhi Riots erupted in February 2020 in the Northeast Delhi against the backdrop of the citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019. In India the Delhi Riots 2020 represents a significant episode of civil unrest. This event is regarded as a profoundly tragic manifestation of communal tensions in the contemporary India. The unrest resulted in killing of 53 people, most of them from the Muslim community, injuries to hundreds of individuals and the displacement of thousands. "More than 50 people, mostly Muslims, were killed after the clashes broke out between Hindus and Muslims over a controversial citizenship law in February 2020" (Poddar, 2025, para. 3). highlighting the need of prosecutions. Social media played a highly significant role in influencing the spread of information and was responsible for shaping the public discourse during the

unrest. The algorithmic structure of social media that heavily relies on emotional and sensational content to drive engagement facilitated the viral spread of the videos, provocative and inflammatory content that further intensified intercommunity hostilities.

To explore the impact of social media on the unfolding of these events, a content analysis of posts, videos circulated at the time of the riots was conducted. The analysis revealed seven dominant categories of content: (1) Hate speech and religious division, (2) Rumor and misinformation (3) Suppressing minority voices by the powerful government (4) Mob violence (5) counter Narratives and documentation (6) Solidarity and relief appeals.

Hate speech and religious division- The social media platforms like Whatsapp, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube and Facebook contained videos and posts featuring provocative and inciting rhetoric religious slogans, defamatory memes and called to unite religious minority, Muslims to stand together. There were many Hindus whose comments in the post were analyzed and there they portrayed Muslims as a religious group who are the perpetrators of violence and also used images, captions and messages using violent retribution. The repetition and virility of such messages, post, demonstrated how social media can function in intensifying community division in the country where there is multi religious people living together and it often leads to the community stratification encouraging protest and mob action through digital validation.

Rumor and Misinformation- Content analysis also identified the widespread circulation of altered and previously recorded videos misrepresented as being related to the riots. For example unreal footage of the violence from other states was circulated with caption linking to the Delhi Riots, framing one community as responsible for attacks. The post and the videos were circulated via Whatsapp groups and Facebook groups where verification was rare which created the cycle of fear and mistrust. This virility of fake contents of social media impacted the people emotionally and the content was spread without being verified.

Suppressing minority voices by the powerful government- there was another crucial pattern that was revealed through content analysis which was systematic silencing or minority voices. The social media users who criticized the state action were discredited as Anti Nationalist tied up with Terrorist. Khan (2020) tweeted, "A mob of Hindutva terrorist are setting property on fire, spreading violence and Delhi Police standing there as mute spectators." Additionally, Umar Khalid was also jailed who was an important activist along with other student activists who were continuously speaking against CAA and were gathering communal mob through silent protests. Also the minorities who were vocal and writing in the social media, their accounts and reports were blocked .This shows how the power operates online where marginalized voices often face algorithmic invisibility and target de legitimization. It shows that the power controls the media and the state.

Mob violence- the most alarming category involved posts that directly incited or coordinated violent actions. In several Whatsapp group and Facebook groups calls for assembling in the particular locations, instructions for targeting particularneighborhoods and videos of attack was circulated. This kind of information through media glorified mobs by framing their action as a defense of the nation or protection of the religious faith. Such digital coordination demonstrates the link between online rhetoric and offline violence where social media not only serves to be a discursive space but as an instrument of mobilizing collective aggression.

Counter-Narratives and Documentation- different types of post emerged in Twitter and Instagram and other news channels. The independent journalists and the eyewitness activist shared real time videos from the riots affected neighborhoods. This post also showed the targeted violence against minorities and non-police actions for the protection of the people. #DelhiRiots and #DelhiViolence gave a platform to counter mainstream mediathat works under the institutional narratives. Through the digital coverage and

documentation marginalized voices gained visibility and globally audiences were aware of the violence and its scale.

Solidarity and relief appeals- There were smaller posts with a specific category that focused on humanitarian assistance. Social media users circulated helpline numbers, donation drives for the victims of violence. It was civil society and NGOs who mobilized through Twitter, Facebook showing how social media can function as a tool of resilience and community rebuilding amidst destruction.

Interpretation of the case study- Delhi Riots 2020

Alongside the weaponization of the digital platforms social media also provided tools for counter-narratives and accountability. Independent journalists' activist and citizens used Twitter and Instagram to document violence in real time shared videos, policy complicity, and attacks on vulnerable groups. Such documents became very prudent in countering sections of mainstream media that initially downplayed the scale of violence framed in biased way.

Global hashtags like #DelhiRiots #DelhiViolence brought international attention mobilizing solidarity networks, humanitarian aid and pressure on authorities to act. The Delhi Riots reveal the dual role of social media as an amplifier of hate speech violence but also as a platform for marginalized voices and ground realities to emerge. The case also underscores how digital technologies are deeply embedded in existing political conflicts capable of both exacerbating divisions and enabling accountability.

This case highlights that social media is not a neutral medium rather it mirrors and magnifies existing social divisions and struggles over legitimacy. The content analysis also shows that Delhi Riots did not just took place in the streets of Northeast Delhi but it was also contested in the digital spaces where narratives of hate and peace, misinformation and accountability coexisted and competed for dominance.

Case Study II : The MeToo Movement 2017

MeToo Movement began as a grassroots movement initiated by Tarana Burke in the United States gained global prominence in the year 2017 when the actress Alyssa Milano had tweeted #MeToo to unite all the women to speak against gender based violence. Alyssa Milano's (2017) viral post stated " If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'Me Too' as a reply to this tweet." The movement which originated in the US gained global prominence when women all over the world came through the media to go against the gender oppression. This led to feminist mobilization. In India the movement started gaining ground in 2018 when women from all the sectors including cinemas started to come up and speak against gender based violence. In contrast to the Delhi Riots MeToo movement shows the transformative capacity of the social media as a tool for justice seeking and solidarity. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram became central arenas where the survivors shared their stories, created solidarity.

To explore the movement that had a global prominence a content analysis of social media posts, videos under #MeToo #MeTooIndia was conducted. The analysis revealed six different categories of content: (1) Survivors Testimony (2) Naming and Shaming Perpetrators, (3) Solidarity and Support posts, (4) backlash and Trolling (5) Institutional silencing of the survivors (6) Call for Legal and structural change

Survivors Testimonies- The majority of posts were centered on survivors recounting their personal experiences of sexual harassment and assault. These ranged from short tweets to extended narratives on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Many survivors emphasized both the emotional burden of silence and the empowering effect of publicly sharing their stories. These testimonies demonstrate how social media served as a safe space for articulating experiences that are often silenced within families, workplaces, or formal legal systems.

Naming and Shaming of Perpetrators- Another prominent category involved posts where survivors explicitly identified influential men in fields such as media, academia, entertainment, and politics as

perpetrators. This practice challenged entrenched hierarchies by bypassing conventional complaint procedures and exposing individuals who typically remained protected within institutional structures. The viral circulation of such posts increased pressure on the accused, leading in some cases to resignations or exposure to public scrutiny.

Solidarity and Support Posts-A considerable portion of posts came from allies, friends, and organizations expressing support for survivors. These included hashtags such as #ISupportHer as well as collective statements issued by feminist groups. Such expressions highlighted how the movement fostered digital spaces of care and validation, thereby reducing the isolation commonly associated with experiences of sexual harassment.

Backlash and Trolling- In contrast to supportive voices, there was also notable resistance manifested through backlash. Some posts questioned survivors' credibility, dismissed the movement as elitist, or accused women of tarnishing reputations without due process. Acts of trolling, online harassment, and character attacks against outspoken women underscored the persistence of patriarchal dominance within digital spaces.

Institutional Silencing of Survivors- A recurring pattern involved institutions and powerful actors attempting to suppress the voices of survivors. In some cases, organizations threatened legal action against women who came forward, while others halted internal investigations without proper follow-up. Survivors and activists highlighted these practices of suppression, revealing how social media itself became a contested arena where issues of legitimacy and silencing unfolded.

Demands for Legal and Structural Reform- Another prominent trend extended beyond individual testimonies to calls for systemic transformation. Users advocated for stronger workplace protections, gender sensitization initiatives, and comprehensive legal reforms to address harassment. Hashtags such as #TimesUp, #GenderJustice, and #MeTooIndia often intersected, illustrating that the movement was not limited to personal accountability but also sought broader structural change.

Interpretation of the case study- Me Too Movement

Collectively, these six categories demonstrate the multifaceted role of social media within the MeToo Movement. The platform simultaneously enabled testimony, visibility, and solidarity, while also exposing participants to backlash and institutional resistance. By foregrounding demands for systemic change, the movement highlighted its wider emancipatory potential by transcending personal narratives to directly confront entrenched social and gender inequalities. This case illustrates that digital platforms are both enabling and contested spaces. While they offer visibility and community for marginalized voices, they also reproduce hierarchies of power, resistance, and suppression. The content analysis of posts under #MeTooIndia reveals that the movement was not only about individual stories of harassment but also about negotiating cultural legitimacy, institutional accountability, and visions of gender justice in the digital age.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of social media posts during the Delhi Riots (2020) and the MeToo Movement in India (2018 onwards) provides important insights into the dual role of digital platforms in contemporary society. By placing these two case studies side by side, it becomes evident that while social media can serve as a catalyst for violence, polarization, and suppression, it can equally become a space for empowerment, testimony, and collective mobilization.

Social Media as a contested space of Conflict vs. Testimony In the case of the Delhi Riots, content analysis revealed a prevalence of hate speech, misinformation, and even coordinated mob violence. These examples demonstrate howsocial media can be appropriated to fuel communal hatred, legitimize aggression, and mobilize collective violence in deeply polarized contexts. By contrast, in the MeToo Movement, the

majority of posts consisted of personal testimonies of sexual harassment and assault. Rather than provoking conflict, these narratives disrupted long-standing silences and collectively documented women's lived experiences. This comparison highlights how the discursive role of social media changes depending on context: during the Delhi Riots, it functioned as an amplifier of fear and hostility, whereas in MeToo, it became a repository of trauma and testimony.

Rumor and Misinformation vs. Naming and Shaming

The Delhi Riots exposed how rumors and misinformation circulated rapidly through doctored videos and recycled footage, fueling communal violence. This reflects the algorithmic bias of digital platforms that prioritize sensational, emotionally charged content over verified facts. In contrast, within the MeToo Movement, an opposite but equally powerful practice emerged—naming and shaming perpetrators. Instead of relying on fabricated information, posts were grounded in experiential truth, often bypassing formal institutional channels that had previously failed survivors.

Both categories show that social media challenges conventional truth regimes: in riots, misinformation undermined factual truth, whereas in MeToo, experiential truth challenged institutional silence.

Solidarity and Relief vs. Solidarity and Support

A point of similarity emerges in the role of solidarity. During the Delhi Riots, social media facilitated relief efforts, such as posts about shelters, helplines, and donations. In MeToo, solidarity manifested through supportive hashtags, public endorsements, and collective feminist statements. While the contexts differ—immediate humanitarian needs in riots versus psychological and social validation in MeToo—the underlying function was the same: social media provided spaces of community-building and care in moments of crisis.

This similarity suggests that beyond division, digital platforms also enable networks of compassion and resilience.

Suppression of Voices in Both Movements

Both cases also demonstrate that social media is not an equal playing field. In the Delhi Riots, posts revealed the suppression of minority voices by powerful actors, where dissenting accounts were delegitimized as "anti-national," censored, or mass-reported. Similarly, in the MeToo Movement, survivors often faced institutional silencing, with threats of defamation suits, workplace intimidation, or public shaming.

This parallel highlights that digital platforms replicate offline power hierarchies. Even as they provide visibility to marginalized groups, they are also spaces where dominant institutions exercise control and suppression.

Mob Violence vs. Backlash and Trolling

One of the stark contrasts between the two cases lies in the outcomes of online hostility. In the Delhi Riots, digital incitement translated into physical mob violence on the streets. Online rhetoric did not remain discursive but became embodied in collective aggression. In the MeToo Movement, hostility largely took the form of backlash and trolling, where women faced digital abuse and reputational attacks. While both forms of hostility sought to silence and intimidate, the Delhi Riots highlight the capacity of social media to directly facilitate violent mobilization, whereas in MeToo, hostility remained largely within digital boundaries, though its psychological effects were severe.

This comparison demonstrates that the translation of online narratives into offline realities is highly context-dependent.

Beyond the Immediate: Structural Implications finally, both case studies highlight broader structural dynamics. In the Delhi Riots, social media mirrored and magnified pre-existing communal divisions, political polarization, and state complicity. In MeToo, digital platforms became spaces to demand legal reforms,

workplace policies, and structural gender justice. In both instances, social media was not merely about communication but about reshaping power relations—either by exacerbating inequalities (Delhi) or by challenging them (MeToo).

In comparing these cases, it becomes evident that social media is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently destructive. Rather, it is a contested terrain where narratives of hate and peace, suppression and resistance, violence and justice coexist. The Delhi Riots demonstrate the destructive potential of social media when mobi lized in a communalized context, while the MeToo Movement reveals its transformative potential when harnessed for justice and solidarity.

Sociologically, the cases underscore three key insights: Context Matters: The role of social media is shaped by the political, cultural, and social environment in which it operates. Power Matters: Digital platforms reproduce hierarchies, where marginalized voices struggle for visibility while dominant actors attempt suppression. Translation Matters: Online discourse does not remain confined to digital spaces instead it spills over into offline realities, sometimes as physical violence (Delhi Riots) and sometimes as cultural transformation (MeToo).

Thus, the comparative analysis shows that social media is best understood not as a neutral tool but as a site of struggle over meaning, legitimacy, and power in the digital age.

Conclusion

The study has highlighted the dual nature of social media as both a space for conflict escalation and a platform for peacebuilding. While social media facilitates the rapid spread of divisive content and amplifies existing tensions, it also provides avenues for solidarity, collective mobilization, and the advancement of social movements. Therefore social media cannot be regarded merely as a tool for information sharing and communication; it is also a contested arena where identities, power relations, and notions of truth are continuously constructed, challenged and negotiated.

It was very evident from the Delhi Riots case that social media often intensifies conflict by spreading misinformation, reinforcing communal divisions and marginalizing minority voices. At the same time, it also served as a platform for raising awareness through helplines and campaigns advocating protection. Similarly, the #MeToo Movement demonstrated the potential of social media to amplify voices against gender based violence, promote solidarity and transform experiences of injustice into a collective narrative that demanded recognition of systemic gender inequality. However the movement also revealed how powerful institutions sought to silence the victims, thereby exposing institutional failures in ensuring accountability. Despite the challenges, the framing of such movements underscores how social media brought issues of gender justice and inequality into mainstream discourse.

The theories including Conflict theories, Symbolic Interactionism and Framing theory employed in this study provided significant insights into the underlying dynamics of social media, highlighting its dual role as both an instrument of oppression and a catalyst for reform and resistance.

Based on the analysis the research concludes that the role of social media in intensifying conflict and constructing of peace narratives is not set in advance but it is shaped by social and political contexts, the goal-oriented behavior of social media users, and socio technical design of social media platforms. in conclusion social media emerges as a contested space where peace narratives are constructed while conflicts are simultaneously intensified. There is a challenge for the policy makers and scholars, the challenge lies in understanding this duality- acknowledging its potential to incite violence while also recognigizing its capacity to democratize narratives, amplify marginalized voices, and foster change. Ultimately social media not only exposes hidden forms of oppression but also provides opportunities for collective empowerment and resistance. The findings also offer significant contributions reflecting the urgent call for comprehensive media literacy, mechanism for regulating content and inclusive engagement strategies to utilise the positive potential of media.

Future research may also explore whether prolonged exposure to algorithmically driven social media environments influences behavioural outcomes among adolescents, including vulnerability to risk behaviours such as substance use and addiction-related tendencies.

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